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**Ambiguïtat, Light and Darkness in Henry James's
*The Portrait of a Lady***

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Abstract

This paper analyzes how Henry James's novel *The Portrait of a Lady* questions the patriarchal system and the woman status in the Victorian period. The paper's approach is a close reading of the narrative text with a focus on language use. Aspects of the novel such as the tendency towards the negative polarity of language, ambiguity, and the use of light and dark unveil subversive elements in the discourse. Although the novel appears to offer a contained ending by confining the protagonist within the same oppressive system it undermines, readers are invited to reflect on positive social alternatives. The starting point is created by the protagonist, who positions herself in a feminist solidary attitude by empathy.

Key words: capitalism, imagination, ambiguity, light and dark, empathy

Resum

Aquest treball analitza com la novel·la de Henry James *The Portrait of a Lady* qüestiona el sistema patriarcal i l'estatus de la dona en el període victorià. Per demostrar el qüestionament, el mètode utilitzat és una lectura a fons del text narratiu amb el focus en l'ús del llenguatge. Aspectes de la novel·la com la tendència cap a la polaritat negativa de la llengua, l'ambigüitat, l'ús de llum i foscor descobreixen elements subversius en el discurs. Tot i que la novel·la finalitza confinant la protagonista dins del mateix sistema opressor, la imaginació dels lectors serà fonamental per plasmar alternatives socials positives. La protagonista ja marca un punt de partida amb la seva posició solidària i feminista mitjançant l'ús de l'empatia.

Paraules clau: capitalisme, imaginació, ambigüitat, llum i foscor, empatia

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1. INTRODUCTION

Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is written on the negative polarity of language. In this paper, I will be approaching aspects of the novel obliquely such as the narrator's method and characters construction to reveal a resistance and a consequent deferral of the narrative discourse to signifying, to a fixed meaning. The aim is to disclose on different levels how the narrator deconstructs the main character's social and personal context by use of negative and/or ambiguous language and by dim light and lighting. The narrator's and the characters' use of language defined by ambiguity converge into semiotic balance in which the virtual signified—Isabel Archer and her destiny—are recognized negatively among a string of signifiers with which they ultimately deny identification. Once Isabel Archer acquires consciousness of perception through experience, once her worldly education is completed, what her future will be is envisioned by the heroine but deferred permanently to the reader in the manner of Derrida's 'trace'. The argumentation finally suggests that the status of women in the 19th century Victorian context did render itself to criticism, but did not yet offer a positive alternative, only an occasion for the readers to reflect on the prospect of social transformation. While James's narrative style did project itself into the future and the establishment of modernism, in terms of the woman status it could only offer a contained but nonetheless subversive social critique.

1.1. Context

In the *Introduction* to the Oxford World's Classic edition of *The Portrait of a Lady*, editor Roger Luckhurst determines that "this is a novel about a woman's choice. Isabel's naivety is her optimistic belief in self-determination. In Europe, however, a woman is variously constrained by the ties of history, breeding, culture and convention" (2009, p.xix). The greater social context in James's narrative is constituted around the theme of "the encounter of the Old and New World, in an era when political and economic power was inexorably shifting towards America, yet Europe retained much of its cultural authority" (p.ix). Within the capitalist frame of the novel and taking into account that "cultural products are the symptom of an underlying social configuration" (Culler, 1997, p.51) my aim is a close reading of the narrative discourse in a deconstructionist manner so that the veiled questioning of the woman status within the patriarchal Victorian period come to light.

One of the layers of *The Portrait of a Lady*, a figure in its carpet, encompasses capitalist vocabulary, which renders the means of exploring most of its characters, propelled by money and investment. The text is sprinkled with a sheer polish of our modern-day brokerage. Most of the characters belong either to European social classes that come with rank and its consequent fortunes or to the assimilated American bourgeoisie that landed there with an already acquired fortune which does not impose the necessity of incorporating themselves into the working class. The vocabulary related to capitalism constitutes a layer in the novel, it does not alter its other aspects but rather cohabits with them. It includes words such as *money*, *banks*, *property*, *dowry*, *inheritance*, *bribe*, *sale*, *auction*, *opportunity* and *confidence*. The characters understand the language of money and the need to come into the confidence offered by it as means of subsistence (Henrietta Stackpole), as means of maintaining status or rank (Daniel Touchett, Mrs. Touchett, Lord Warburton), of preserving one's health (Ralph Touchett) or of adding new items to a collection (Edward Rosier, Gilbert Osmond). Isabel Archer is the only character in the novel that "of course knew nothing about bills" (p. 37). When aunt Lydia found her in her grandmother's house in Albany, Isabel was asked what was to be done with it after her father's death, but the young lady was at odds as to her answer. She candidly responded twice "I haven't the least idea" (p. 40) provoking thus her elder to doubt her intelligence: "'That's the second time you have said that to me,' her aunt rejoined. 'And yet you don't look at all stupid.'" (p. 40). This dialogue points out to the fact that the language spoken among the American and English middle and upper classes at the end of 19th century was capitalist, but Isabel had not been educated in it. The omniscient narrator instructs the readers that "The foundation of her knowledge was really laid in the idleness of her grandmother's house, where [...] she had uncontrolled use of a library full of books with frontispieces, [...]. When she had found one to her taste—she was guided in the selection chiefly by the frontispieces" (p. 38). From this short passage, we become aware of two essential characteristics of the protagonist: one is that she did not get a proper education, and the other one is that Isabel does judge a book by its cover. Still early in the novel, the narrator allows the reader to have a glimpse at the protagonist's future:

She was a person of great good faith, and if there was a great deal of folly in her wisdom those who judge her severely may have the satisfaction of finding that, later, she became consistently wise only at the cost of an amount of folly which will constitute almost a direct appeal to charity. (p. 114)

In the course of the novel, Isabel becomes victim of the economic (mis)practices in the social context because of the fortune she inherits from her uncle. The objectivization process though is divulged by other characters' language when referring to her even before she acquires financial independence. For instance, Ralph demands of his mother with regards to Isabel "What do you mean to do with her?" (p. 54). His motivations are not petty, but the question proves the point of the intrinsic qualities of the social discourse of the period. Further into the story, Osmond too asks of Madame Merle in an interested manner "What do you want to do with her?" (p. 244). Once Isabel finds out the truth that Madame Merle did interfere for her marriage to Osmond to become reality, the young woman inscribes herself within the material language that she had previously not adhered to and sadly confesses "She made a convenience of me" (p. 564). The capitalist vocabulary the novel is so permeated with ultimately engulfs Isabel as a proof that there is no existence outside discourse. Having exposed the woman status in the text, the consequent step is to reveal that "language is thus both the concrete manifestation of ideology—the categories in which speakers are authorized to think—and the site of its questioning or undoing" (Culler, 1997, p. 61). James's novel offers the reader a means of questioning the predominant patriarchal outlook and the woman status, under an apparent conformity with the social order as it is. The veiled in-depth message though comes to surface as we read the text in the key of a contained but nonetheless disruptive discourse.

1.2. The Imagination Principle

The imagination principle is intrinsic to the work of fiction and a requirement of readers and academics. Virginia Woolf stated in the 1925 essay "The Patron and the Crocus" that "To read a novel is a difficult and complex art" (n.p.). She believed that "You must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if you are going to make use of all that the novelist—the great artist—gives you" (n.p.). Moreover, Woolf persuades us that by exercising imagination we might capture "the vague ideas that have been tumbling in the misty depths of our minds" (n.p.). Previously to Woolf, in the essay "The Art of Fiction", James had professed imagination's relevance as a means of exploring "The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern, the condition of feeling life, in general, so completely that you are well on your way to knowing any particular corner of it" (1884, p. 5). The imagination principle embodied in the character of Isabel Archer in

The Portrait of a Lady is stated further in the preface of the novel, James's objective is her "motionlessly *seeing*" (p. 16, italics in original):

She sits up, by her dying fire, far into the night, under the spell of recognitions on which she finds the last sharpness suddenly wait. It is a representation simply of her motionlessly *seeing*, and an attempt withal to make the mere still lucidity of her act as 'interesting' as the surprise of a caravan or the identification of a pirate. It represents, for that matter, one of the identifications dear to the novelist, and even indispensable to him; but it all goes on without her being approached by another person and without her leaving her chair. It is obviously the best thing in the book, but it is only a supreme illustration of the general plan. (p. 16)

2. ASPECTS OF THE NOVEL

2.1. Ambiguity

2.1.1. The Narrator's Ambiguous/Negative Use of Language

Given the complexity of James's prose, critics have coined the term "Jamesian ambiguity" (Sussman, 2014, p. 2). In the article "Disambiguating Henry James", Matthew Sussman defends the following theory:

I do not think James's reader ought to be embarrassed by the explanatory desire or by the epistemological assumptions that govern its realization. Instead, we ought to take seriously the fact that Jamesian ambiguity elicits a predictable (if ironic) critical reflex that seeks to transform ambiguity into lucidity through the very act of defending it. (p. 3)

Though the critical reflex Sussman refers to is directed at the structural ambiguity of the Jamesian fictional universe, the term bears the added implication of the analysis of the social discourse embedded in it. Ambiguity "in literary critical usage has come to describe anything capable of being understood in more than one way" (p. 4), Sussman claims. Thus, an obvious meaning is being effaced from the prose, leaving space for the imagination. He further includes in the study Tzvetan Todorov who in *The Poetics of Prose* had analyzed James's short stories and came to the conclusion that "the Jamesian narrative is always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause (145)" (2014, p. 8), "there is no truth, there is no certainty (149)" (2014, p. 8). It is the quest

that matters in Todorov's view, "the secret of the narrative is also the secret to the narrative, with the absent cause accounting entirely for the 'whole present machinery' (145) that it sets in motion" (Sussman, 2014, p. 8). In other words, the reader may enjoy James's work as "art for art's sake" ("Art for Art's Sake: Its Fallacy and Viciousness", 1917, p. 98), the unfolding of the fictional discourse per se and more importantly not be bothered by meanings beyond its limit since this limit is constantly out of reach. In a similar train of thought, writer Alain Robbe-Grillet in a theoretical essay in 1956, "A Future for the Novel", criticized previous fiction's tendency to encapsulate transcendental meanings, where "the word functioned as a trap in which the writer captured the universe in order to hand it over to society" (p. 24). James's semantic choices imply a preference for ambiguous words, on the negative polarity of language where a constant deferral of meaning is unavoidable. The fiction is symptomatic of its social context reflected in the manner of writing which denotes a collapse of language's affirmative powers, of creating presence. This can be observed even from the opening sentence of the novel:

Under certain circumstances there are few hours in life more agreeable than the hour dedicated to the ceremony known as afternoon tea. There are circumstances in which, whether you partake of the tea or not—some people of course never do—the situation is in itself delightful. (p. 1)

The negative feature of the sentence is disguised by a veil of the double conditioning—"under certain circumstances" and "there are circumstances"—without revealing though what those positive circumstances for enjoying the tea ceremony might be. Moreover, what is indicated as agreeable is undermined by the presence of the adjective 'few' which leaves the reader wondering if this "innocent pastime" (p. 1) is worthwhile after all. There is a sense of withdrawal on behalf of the narrator as well, who appears to invite 'you', the reader, to participate just to refute the invitation a moment later by elegantly leaving the option open not to be engaged, "some people of course never do" (p. 1). This in fact is the only reinforced affirmation within the sentence which leads us to believe that we should not wholly implicate ourselves and keep a discerning mind as to what the novel is presenting us with. What unfolds is a deconstruction of a tradition, the British afternoon tea.

The narrator continues in the same manner: "The persons concerned in it were taking their pleasure quietly, and they were not of the sex which is supposed to furnish the regular votaries of

the ceremony I have mentioned” (p. 1). The tea ceremony in Victorian England was usually developed indoors, in the drawing room and the person in charge of the ritual was the mistress of the house. Gail Marshal in the 2016 article “Henry James’s Houses: Domesticity and performativity” unequivocally declares: “Henry James is the consummate novelist of the enclosed space: the drawing room, the carefully landscaped garden, the doorway that frames its entrants so poignantly” (p. 1). In this scene though, the drawing room is moved outdoors on the lawn of “an old English country-house” (p. 1). The participants are oddly presented in initial instance as shadows: “The shadows on the perfect lawn were straight and angular; they were the shadows of an old man sitting in a deep-wicker chair near the low table on which the tea had been served, and two younger men strolling to and fro, in desultory talk, in front of him” (p. 1). When the narrator points that the persons involved are not of the feminine sex, without indicating the word “feminine,” he is deferring the reader’s expectations. The opposite of what we are expecting to be feminine is not expressed as male immediately. The word that follows the phrase “not of the sex” is ‘shadows’, thus not a confirmation of the binary election male-female. In the line of Sausurre’s semiotics, we know things differentially by that which they are not. Nevertheless, in the election of the noun to follow “not of the sex”, ‘shadow’ would not appear in the word cluster as a natural eligible choice. Following this delay of the referential function, the narrator falls into the expected social language just to undermine it over again. The referential signifiers of ‘shadows’ are an “old man” sitting “near the low table,” though not a patriarch at the head of his table and the younger men are engaged in “desultory talk.” The male element is neutralized in a novel that deals with the “international theme”(Porte, 1990, p.1) and in which Europe is presented as “decayed”, “a mere social theatre”, with its “limited social mobility, arranged marriages, convent education for girls, fixed social classes and inherited privilege” (Pippin, 2013, n.p.).

As the majority of novels are setting the tone for the rest of the discourse from the opening pages, the analysis above is an illustrating example of James’s method in *The Portrait of a Lady*, ambiguity achieved by the deferral of meaning. By use of ambiguous language, towards the polarity of negation, the reader is invited to discern what the ultimate interpretation might be, what the affirmation stands for just to have it constantly deferred or downright contradicted because the narrator leaves the option open to the imagination.

2.1.2. *The Characters' Ambiguous/ Negative Use of Language*

As we've made an impression about the narrator's use of language, it is time to take a closer look at the characters', starting with the protagonist and then extending the circle of analysis to the other two members of the triad, Madame Merle and Osmond. Isabel Archer's sentences are declaratively negative as opposed to the narrator's language which tends towards deconstruction and negative polarity by means of ambiguity and gaps. In the relationship constituted by Isabel, Serena Merle and Osmond, their common denominator being that they are the ones willing to establish themselves openly on negative terms, Isabel is the one who defers her meaning as I propose to reveal in the following sections. Madame Merle and Osmond are displayed ultimately as praying to the god of social conventionality.

To begin with, Isabel's self-image is expressed in negative terms, the negative element being synonym to that of lack, of absence viewed as positive circumstance. This is what she tells Caspar Goodwood, the first of three suitors, when she rejects his marriage proposal: "I'm not in my first youth—I can do what I choose—I belong quite to the independent class. I've neither father nor mother; I'm poor and of a serious disposition; I'm not pretty. I therefore am not bound to be timid and conventional; indeed I can't afford such luxuries" (p. 170). With all her Emersonian ideas of self-sufficiency, that of claiming no authority above herself, Isabel's conversation is characterized as light, "chatter" (p. 67) by the elder and the more experienced as Daniel Touchett and Madame Merle. Moreover, the narrator interferes to clarify that "the effect she produced upon people was often different from what she supposed" (p. 67). This is one of many instances in which the narrator undermines Isabel's statements throughout the novel; he goes so far as to declare that "many of her opinions had doubtless but a slender value" (p. 67). This is what motivated Colton Valentine in the 2019 article "Does James Love His Isabel? Revisiting Affect in the Author-Character Relation" to make the following statement:

If James loves his Isabel, it is certainly not in *this* sense—the sense of granting her such a 'long rope' that she should roam free in an ample, ill-fitting fictional realm. Instead, we might say that James loved Isabel only so much as he loved her *Portrait*, that he posited her freedom only to the extent that it freed up his own art of fiction. (p. 233, italics in original)

Secondly, Madame Merle describes herself in terms of negatives and lacks: “what have I got? Neither husband, nor position, nor the traces of a beauty that I never had” (p. 206). As this was an occasional lapse in the composure this lady habitually exhibited, the “bitterness”(p. 205) of the declaration and the fact that it was not a display of negative features presented as a positive, modest characterization, the truth of it startled Isabel who believed that “introspection was, after all, an exercise in the open air” (p. 66) because of her decision that “she would be what she appeared, and she would appear what she was” (p. 64). Before Madame Merle’s disappointing self-portrayal, in chapter VI, Isabel’s own theories are described. She is inexperienced because “she had seen very little of the evil of the world, but she had seen women who lied and who tried to hurt each other” (p. 63). The contingency of the words ‘evil’ and ‘women’ appears as peculiar in this sentence because in retrospective it is precisely a woman who, having internalized the patriarchal system, perpetuates the “exchange of women” (Irigaray, 1977, p. 184) by plotting Isabel’s marriage with Osmond. Luce Irigaray in chapter VIII “Women on the Market,” of the *The Sex Which Is Not One* claims that in patriarchal society women are commodities:

The use and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(mo)-sexuality. [...] Reigning everywhere, although prohibited in practice, hom(m)osexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign, and heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man’s relations with himself, of relations among men. (1977, p. 172)

The oddity of Isabel’s rumination stands out because it brings forth something underlying in the discourse. Irigaray points out that women among themselves also treat each other as commodities, “For uprooted from their ‘nature,’ they no longer relate to each other except in terms of what they represent in men’s desire, and according to the ‘forms’ that this imposes on them” (1977, p. 188). The cultural theorist concluded that “they are not even ‘conscious’ of it,” and that “*Socially*, they are objects for and among men and furthermore they cannot do anything but mimic a ‘language’ that they have not produced” (1977, p.189, italics in original). The Jamesian narrative unconsciously betrays an anomaly of the social discourse and foresees its consequence, that of Madame Merle making a “convenience” (p. 564) out of Isabel in favor of the older woman’s former lover, the motive being Isabel’s inheritance from her uncle. Consequently, the commodity Isabel/money is transferred from one man to another and the mediator is a woman. While Madame

Merle, belonging to the “old, old world”(p. 202) made her choice intentionally, it is nonetheless interesting that Isabel has the unconscious intuition of the social mechanisms because—it follows naturally—she too has internalized the patriarchal patterns.

Finally, we approach Gilbert Osmond’s manner of speech. Although he displays his charms to seduce Isabel, his discourse is not ambiguous. He does characterize himself in terms of negative features as does the young lady, yet it is she who chooses to view them as positive. When Mr. Osmond declares his love to Isabel, he is not disguising his lacks: “I’ve neither fortune, nor fame, nor extrinsic advantages of any kind. So I offer nothing” (p. 310). These lacks sound romantic to Isabel because she believes them to be a disguise for modesty. She doesn’t pay attention to his declaration that form and tradition are essential in his view on life: “No, I’m not conventional: I’m convention itself” (p. 312). What attract Isabel to Osmond are his absences as she herself confesses. Even from their first encounter at his villa in Florence, Isabel observes that “It was not so much what he said and did, but rather what he withheld” (p. 264). Later on, when Ralph tries to warn her that by marrying Osmond, “you’re going to be put into a cage” (p. 340), Isabel fiercely defends her freedom of choice by exposing the positive side of his shortcomings “no property, no titles, no honours, no houses, nor lands, nor position, nor reputation, nor brilliant belongings of any sort. It’s the total absence of all these things that pleases me” (p. 346). The concept of lack/absence in Isabel’s character is strongly related to the concept of theory. The narrator indicates that “Isabel Archer was a young person of many theories; her imagination was remarkably active” (p. 62). Theories for her usually make up for what she does not know or better yet, what she is not curious to know. Even from childhood, she refrained from directing her curiosity outwards and outdoors, she preferred the solitude of her own mind and the power of her imagination: “But she had no wish to look out, for this would have interfered with her theory that there was a strange, unseen place on the other side—a place which became to the child’s imagination, according to its different moods, a region of delight or of terror” (p. 38). Thus, in Isabel’s conversation with Ralph we are informed that “it was wonderfully characteristic of her that, having invented a fine theory, about Gilbert Osmond, she loved him not for what he really possessed, but for his very poverties dressed out as honours” (p. 346).

2.1.3. *The Negative Events*

Apart from the narrator's language use and characters' speech, in terms of plot James follows Isabel Archer's destiny over a period of years stating mostly the negative events she encounters. While the positive circumstances are not suppressed from the character's trajectory, they are effaced from the texture of fiction in the manner of gaps or are barely hinted at. The issue is that Isabel's life encompassed in *The Portrait of a Lady* is marked predominantly by negative events. We are informed from her conversations that her parents both passed away, the mother when Isabel was a little girl and her father not too long before the story takes her up. The novel's opening and closing are marked by death in symmetric circularity. Shortly after arriving at Gardencourt, her uncle Daniel Touchett passes. Towards the end of the novel, her cousin Ralph is lost too, leaving Isabel with little support on behalf of her family. Other than underlining the negative events in Isabel's life, her losses, it is revealing that the positive ones are not stated as such or are passed over as if they were barely relevant. Language has lost its power to imagine a future in the frame of an oppressively materialistic world.

As stated in previous section, Isabel has three suitors. Even though she stresses to Ralph that there are other things a woman can do apart from marrying and her creed of independence, she finally decides to accept Osmond in marriage. The scene where he declares his love to Isabel is displayed, though the scene of the proposal and more importantly, Isabel's acceptance speech and motivations are missing from the novel. What the reader must conform with is Isabel meeting with Caspar Goodwood because she feels she owes it to him first before making the announcement public. Isabel, the narrator lets us know, is deeply keen on pleasing others, fact which may appear in contrast with another event towards the end of the novel where she decides to leave Rome and her husband against his protests in order to be with her cousin during his last days. This contrasting however does not seem to justify the narrator's decision not to render the scene of Isabel accepting Osmond in marriage, especially since she had previously denied two other fervent suitors and she had declared to Mr. Goodwood that should he one day hear that she is to marry, he should most surely doubt the veracity of the information.

Another gap in the narrative that the reader may detect is Isabel's motherhood. There is a span of some four years between Isabel's marriage and the moment when the novel takes her up again. During this time, Isabel had had a baby that died some six months after birth. I believe it to

come as a surprise to many readers that the event is mentioned in just one sentence and that its consequences on the protagonist, psychological or otherwise, are missing from the text. The fact points to a lack of continuity, a symptom of dysfunctionality and thus fiction's refusal to open itself to the future in the current conditions.

2.2. *Light and Darkness*

2.2.1. *The Narrator's Use of Dim Light and Lighting*

The general frame of this section will be constituted by the narrator's use of light and dark after which I will undertake the analysis of Isabel Archer's relationship with these principles. This way I shall hope to achieve a comprehensive examination of what the novel has to offer in terms of the light and dark approach and the significations it may acquire for the reader.

Everything from the moments in the day chosen for the development of events and up to the method of lighting interiors speak of a refraining from rendering things clearly which leads us to the already mentioned tendency towards the negative polarity of language, which is symptomatic of the capitalist dysfunctionality. The difficulty of the novel that arises from the dim and the vague both of language and of the thing represented motivates the reader to exercise the critical sense of perception. The inclination towards the negative polarity is not a negative feature of the fiction throughout but a reaffirmation of the association of the two, a possibility for the imagination to construct a positive instance that may overcome the imbalance.

Before I render specific instances of the way in which the novel treats light and dark, I shall presently explain the philosophical concepts that the reading of these elements is based upon. Steven Burik's 2019 premise in the article "Darkness and Light: Absence and Presence in Heidegger, Derrida and Daoism" is that "in recent Western philosophy, both Heidegger and Derrida argue that what the light metaphor represents, the promise of clarity and objectivity, is exactly what makes Western metaphysics problematic" (p. 1). In the light of this study it is revealing that the narrator in *The Portrait of a Lady* is extensively delving into associations of light and darkness as opposite instances of good/evil, presence/ absence, vision/blindness and so forth, nevertheless he does not shrink away from presenting darkness as source of illumination of his protagonist. The illumination refers to Isabel Archer's vision, to her 'motionlessly seeing' that

James so arduously stressed in the preface, without making the division between the two elements a clashing one but rather an attempt to overcome this duality.

The first step is to illustrate the narrator's use of light and dark while at the same time incorporating the ambiguous language detailed in the previous section. The novel opens in "the perfect middle of a splendid summer afternoon" (p. 1). After this moment, there is a predilection for events to unfold in the vague or dim light of a dusk. There is a romantic trace of the shadowy twilight or nighttime to accompany Isabel Archer in the key moments toward her destiny, as a foretelling of their ominous character.

At the beginning of chapter XVIII, Isabel and Ralph rush back from London to Gardencourt because Ralph's father, Daniel Touchett is on his deathbed. The atmosphere is marked by silence: "Isabel went to her own room, noting throughout the house that perceptible hush which precedes a crisis" (p. 179). The reader would expect thus that the "crisis" may refer to Daniel Touchett's imminent passing. Nevertheless, the reader's expectations are collapsed by the narrator because it is precisely this the occasion which he chooses to introduce Madame Merle, who is a key agent in Isabel's life. I refer to her as 'agent' because she supplants Isabel's own agency and marries the young lady to Osmond, making thus a commodity out of Isabel as revealed towards the end of the novel. The narrator's choice of language defers its referential function, stressing that the meaning of 'crisis' may be another than the one immediately at hand, not Daniel Touchett's imminent death but rather Isabel's imagination succumbing under Madame Merle's spell. When she first meets Madame Merle, Isabel is allured into the room by this lady playing the piano:

The lady played in the same manner as before, softly and solemnly, and while she played the shadows deepened in the room. The autumn twilight gathered in, and from her place Isabel could see the rain, which had now begun in earnest, washing the cold-looking lawn and the wind shaking the trees. (p. 181)

Natural vision is clouded by the twilight while at the same time, Isabel's perception is clouded by Madame Merle's charming ways. In addition, Isabel's visit to Gilbert Osmond's home takes place in the afternoon and is permeated with a negative connotation supported both by lexical and syntactic choices. Chapter XXIV opens as follows: "It would certainly have been hard to see what injury could arise to her from the visit she presently paid to Mr. Osmond's hill-top. Nothing could have been more charming than this occasion—a soft afternoon in the full maturity of the Tuscan

spring” (p. 257). Isabel’s perception is identified with that of the reader’s and the narrator’s by the use of the phrase “hard to see” but an alarm is set off in the eyes of the reader—not “poor Isabel’s” (p. 390)—at the sight of the word ‘injury’. This followed by the negation in the chain of metonymy of the adjective ‘charming’ constitute a forewarning for events to come.

The sole afternoon, dusky moments when Isabel’s character is deemed from gloomy associations are the ones placed in Rome as the site where art dwells and where a crushed soul may bend its wounds. In a previous chapter, before her failed marriage, the narrator lets us in on the fact that “Isabel would become a Rome-lover; that was a foregone conclusion” (p. 285). Taking into account the novel’s ambiguous ending, we just might take this conclusion as valid further into the study. On the occasion of her visit to Saint Peter’s cathedral, Isabel is—coincidentally or not—introduced as a Roman, “Of a Sunday afternoon all good Romans [...] follow the custom of going to vespers at Saint Peter’s” (p. 295) attracted by the epitome of the sublime, “She gazed and wondered like a child or a peasant, she paid her silent tribute to the seated sublime” (p. 296). The second occasion on which Isabel visits a Roman place of worship offers another afternoon moment, but this time in a desolate perspective of human frailty. It takes place just after Madame Merle confesses to her having ‘everything’ (p. 510) to do with Isabel and Osmond’s marriage, for arranging it as in a puppeteer’s show because, as she had previously confessed to him, she didn’t “pretend to know what people are meant for”, she only “knew what she could do with them” (p. 244). In this instance, the affirmative sound of the word “everything” is tainted by a negative connotation. Ralph had convinced his father to leave Isabel a fortune for this way she would have an opportunity to “meet the requirements of her imagination” (p. 190). The fortune however, as feared by the old American banker, had an immoral touch to it, “I don’t know that it’s right to make everything so easy for a person” (p. 192). Connotation is deferred on this occasion as well ‘immorality’ does not point to Isabel’s possible corruption under the burden of sudden fortune as Daniel Touchett would have suspected but to the fortune-hunter’s trap laid out by Madame Merle and her former lover. Isabel however is not energetic in her deception as one would have expected her to be, especially since James recommended her in the preface of the novel as “a young woman affronting her destiny” (p. 9). Isabel does not offend anyone, on the contrary, she melts her sorrow into the greater one of humanity:

Isabel took a drive alone that afternoon; she wished to be far away, under the sky, where she could descend from her carriage and tread upon the daisies. She had long before this taken old Rome into her confidence, for in a world of ruins the ruin of her happiness seemed a less unnatural catastrophe. She rested her weariness upon things that had crumbled for centuries and yet still were upright; she dropped her secret sadness into the silence of lonely places, where its very modern quality detached itself and grew objective, so that as she sat in a sun-warmed angle on a winter's day, or stood in a mouldy church to which no one came, she could almost smile at it and think of its smallness. Small it was, in the large Roman record, and her haunting sense of continuity of the human lot easily carried her from the less to the greater (p. 511).

This is one of the first occasions when the novel offers the reader a chance for a 'reparative reading' as defined by Eve Kosofsky-Sedgwick in the essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You" (2003). She speaks about the reparative effect of hope in cultural studies' approach to literature as opposed to the 'paranoid reading', which translates into an understanding of social oppressive mechanisms. In Sedgwick's opinion, the theory focused on questioning social ideologies and the way people bend to them or resist them has not had the expected effect of generating a positive alternative on the public at large, on the contrary, there is currently more violence in the world than ever. While both types of readings, 'paranoid' and 'reparative' arise from the "depressive position" (p. 6) of assuming people's frailty and the world an inhospitable environment, the 'reparative reading' suggests hopeful reconstruction. I adhere to a hopeful reconstruction of *The Portrait of a Lady* as a direct consequence of the 'paranoid readings' that help us understand, assimilate and come to terms with or resist ideologies rather than an alternative way of reading. In interpersonal relations, we may automatically feel empathy for the persons around us, when it comes to social structures though, the wheels are not set in motion as easily.

2.2.2. Light and Dark in the Figure of Isabel Archer

Once we have seen the narrator's use of light and darkness, it is time to address the protagonist's more complex relationship with these principles. James's *The Portrait of a Lady* renders 'light' as metaphor for education, for the protagonist's reaching individual consciousness in the Heideggerian and Derridian manner of overcoming binary oppositions. Even though the

protagonist is presented in opposition with the darkness embodied by Madame Merle and Osmond, she is a mixture of both principles, they can coexist within her complementarily. Once she has her revelation in the long night of reflection described in chapter XLII, the light Isabel acquires is not the slaying principle that casts away all darkness thus making her a “child of light” as she has been envisioned by critics in the line of Theodora Bosanquet’s describing James’s most vulnerable characters (2006, n.p). Her epiphany is relevant to herself solely as the crystallization of identity and subjectivity that refuses to bend under the other characters’ prescriptions who all the while demand of each other “What do you mean to do with her?” (p. 32). This represents a turning point in the novel, where the protagonist starts questioning her identity and subjectivity, addressing the question “*who* am I?”

In the 1990 Introduction to *New Essays on “The Portrait of a Lady”*, Joel Porte talks about the Jamesian technique of ‘chiaroscuro’ in the construction of his “engaging young woman” (p. 3): “Isabel is presented initially as a creature of the sunshine whose perception is ‘clear’ (Chap. 2) and who believes that one ‘should move in a realm of light’ and of ‘happy impulse’ (Chap. 6)” (p. 5). Nevertheless, her attraction to Gilbert Osmond made the narrator admit that this “young lady’s spirit was strange” (Chap. 29). Porte continues, “Isabel Archer—perversely, as it would seem—turns away from the light (as she will do on the last page of the novel) and walks steadily into the dusk” (p. 5) and then concludes, “But Isabel’s ‘straight path’ will apparently lead her back to Gilbert Osmond’s hell and the obscurity of her own dusky nature” (p. 6). In the Preface to the 1908 New York Edition of the novel, James had intended that “The young woman should be herself complex; that was rudimentary—or was at any rate the light in which Isabel Archer had originally dawned” (p. 10). Porte takes a psychological approach to Isabel’s “taste for the *crépuscule*” (p. 6) and suggests in the conclusion of his argument that the word “complex” be substituted for “neurotic” (p. 7). The purpose for mentioning this article is on the one hand to acknowledge that light and dark in the Jamesian discourse had previously enjoyed extensive attention on behalf of the critics and on the other hand to refute Porte’s claim that Isabel has an irresistible attraction to darkness, at least not in the “neurotic” sense that the critic ascribes to it. The general argument I put forth is that James’s language is symptomatic of the patriarchal context and as a consequence, towards the negative polarity of language as a reflection of an unsettling world. The consequent argument is focused on the woman status in the 19th century as ‘commodity’, in Irigaray’s concept. More specifically however, I argue that Isabel and her relationship with light and dark is more complex

than previously commented on. In her case, light is about perception and ultimately education and life experience. She gets to understand her position, that there is no outside of the social context she is set in and that her fondness of freedom will have to expand itself within the limits of this construction. While a contained ending, is nonetheless subversive and an occasion for reflection on things to change.

The philosophical complementarity of light and darkness as envisioned by Steven Burik based on his readings of Heidegger, Derrida and Chinese philosophy was shortly introduced earlier and I will presently clarify even further. Burik's intention is revealed in the following manner: "My strategy consists in (re-)asserting certain forms of darkness over light with the ultimate aim to overcome the hierarchy of the two binary opposites and understand them in a more complementary fashion" (2019, p. 2). Light is always associated in our culture with "security, power (through fire), possibility, and by philosophical extension with Truth, presence, goodness, Reason, purity, and what is worthiest of pursuing" (p. 3). Even though light and dark represent "primordial principles" (p. 3), as he quotes Hans Blumenberg, our most unquenchable desire is "to let light overcome darkness" (p.3) and our most precious ideal is "illumination" (p. 4). On the contrary of light, darkness is a synonym of "ambiguity, unclarity and nonpresence" (p. 5). These three features are incorporated by James in Isabel's character construction rendering her nonetheless not a less convincing figure but rounder, an imaginative provocation. The two philosophers who defended that "light and dark have to go together, and light is not superior to darkness" (2019, p. 7) are Heidegger and Derrida. "Heidegger's famous 'clearing' is a light in darkness, and his favourite light metaphor was therefore the star" (2019, p. 2). The reference is made clear by a quote from the philosopher himself: "Mortal thinking must let itself down into the dark depths of the well if it is to see the stars by day. It remains more difficult to guard the limpidity of the dark than to procure a brightness that only wants to shine as such. What only wants to shine, does not illuminate. (Heidegger 2012: 88–89)" (2019, p. 10). The ban on darkness that Western philosophy has struggled to achieve is viewed as flawed because it is precisely in a context of darkness that light may be seen, in whatever positive instance it has been conceived, making thus necessary that the two principles go together in a yin-yang fashion. The way in which these statements ultimately relate to the construction of character in *The Portrait of a Lady* is that Isabel Archer materializes from the text as an embodiment of the complementarity of light and darkness,

the latter understood not as a negative feature but as absence and deferral of meaning in the manner of Derrida's concept of 'trace'.

As pointed out, lighting in the novel is mostly dim or vague, the reader finds the protagonist in most instances in the dusk. The prevailing setting for her is the interior, as a typical Victorian heroine would be presented in. In the domestic space, Isabel is presented by lamplight or candlelight at key moments in the company of characters that help or misconduct her education, her path to vision and self-consciousness. Isabel is a person of great imagination and little experience. Once she gains the experience and sees herself clearly, there are no more scenes by lamplight, there is no need for other characters to shine, as in 'impose', a light upon her anymore, no further explanations nor hints. Her vision however is acquired in a dark context and she does not seem to overcome it by the end of her journey, she just embraces it within her figure. The reader reaches thus an "impression of life" (James, 1884, p. 4) in the artistic sense rendered by Isabel.

In the 1908 Preface to the novel James remembered the process by which Isabel came to his consciousness and the way she was to be constructed:

'Place the centre of the subject in the young woman's own consciousness,' I said to myself, 'and you get as interesting and as beautiful a difficulty as you could wish. Stick to *that*—for the centre; put the heaviest weight into *that* scale, which will be so largely the scale of her relation to herself' (p. 11-12, italics in original)

The technique was to be reiterated some years after the 1881 first edition of *The Portrait of a Lady* in the novel *The Awkward Age*. James conveyed the method in its respective preface as follows: "[the] central object was my situation, my subject in itself, to which the thing would owe its title, and the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects." (1908, p.xvi). The inception of the character construction technique by use of the domestic symbolism of lamps and candles originated in *The Portrait of a Lady* was further developed by James in the novel *The Awkward Age*. I will examine the crucial moments in the narrative to reveal the narrator's intention.

To begin with, after "crazy aunt Lydia's" (p. 39) visit, who offers to take her to Europe, Isabel feels in distress. Even though an "original" (p. 43) figure as her sister Lilly describes her,

or in the more puzzling presentation offered by her brother-in-law “Isabel’s written in a foreign tongue. I can’t make her out” (p. 43), the heroine has decided to “comply with her aunt’s commands” (p. 44) because she’d “promise almost anything” (p. 41) in order to go to Europe. At first, she is sitting “under the lamp” (p. 45) with “her hands empty” (p. 45) as for the narrator to take a good look at her. The reader is meant yet to take only a glimpse at the most exterior appearance. Her empty hands hint at the fact that she is still a sketch, a promise of discovery. There is also resistance to this prying look, Isabel retracts from under “vague lamplight” (p. 45) into the darkness. It is here that she feels comfortable to allow herself a display of emotions, her restlessness and her agitation. We are promised an impressive discovery, since the proportion of change between what Isabel was and what she will become escapes rendering, it is “out of proportion to its appearance” (p. 45).

Moreover, Isabel presents herself to Ralph as an eager art lover of “natural taste” (p. 58). Tired but not yet “spent” (p. 57), she asks him “to show her the pictures” (p. 57). In the gallery, in the “genial light of the lamps that were on brackets” (p. 58), Isabel herself takes a candlestick to take a closer look. At this point, Ralph’s attention mutates from the paintings to the natural work of art that his cousin is, “bending his eyes much less upon the pictures than on her presence” (p. 58). The gesture is meant as a compliment to Isabel’ being “better worth looking at than most works of art”(p. 58) but it strikes the reader as inscribing her in the tradition of the ‘determining male gaze’ (Mulvey, 1999, p. 62) and woman’s ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’, “displayed as sexual object” (1999, p. 62). Isabel is described in a context of “faded gilding of heavy frames” (p. 58), the definition of the patriarchal circumstances. Ralph’s ‘voyeuristic-scopophilic look’ (Mulvey, 1999, p.68) is his only alternative given that a lethal illness bars him from participation to life’s expected events. Isabel’s appearing into his life is compared to that of owning a work of art: “Suddenly, I receive a Titian, by the post, to hang on my wall” (p. 75). It is not coincidental that works of art are considered commodities in this fiction and not only, resulting that even Isabel’s closest relatives objectify her. Nevertheless, the gesture of taking a candlestick to conduct her own gaze comes out as defiant of the patriarchal structure she is set in. Isabel has a mind of her own and even though she will benefit from Ralph’s benevolence she is decided to see for herself.

Apart from Mrs. Touchett and Ralph, Isabel meets another benevolent figure at Gardencourt. Lord Warburton is one of her unyielding suitors. The narrator allows himself a comic

tone in the description of yet another marriage proposal Isabel gets after that of Caspar Goodwood's. Even though the lord assures Isabel that his passion is "for life, Miss Archer, it's for life" (p. 116), it burns "as steadily as a lamp in a windless place" (p. 116) because it has "sifted itself clear of the baser parts of emotion-the heat, the violence, the unreason" (p. 116). It is not due to the lack of conviction that Lord Warburton appears to display that Isabel rejects him and draws "her hand away" (p. 117) but because she is keen on keeping her freedom, although she never clarifies exactly what she intends to do with it. In Isabel's perception, Lord Warburton represents a "collection of attributes and powers" (p. 114), a system to which she has the intuition to resist because "virtually she had a system and an orbit of her own" (p. 114).

A subtler sketch presenting Isabel objectified is the one where lamps are brought in for tea on one occasion during Daniel Touchett's illness. Mrs. Touchett regards the tea-tray with the same attention that she spares to her niece, "in neither act was it becoming to make a show of avidity" (p. 182). At this point, Madame Merle is introduced, moment in which "while she played (the piano) the shadows deepened in the room" (p. 181), but Isabel is constantly left alone. Ever since her childhood, the young lady has been left to her devices by her father, by her grandmother and now by her aunt. Everyone who should represent a model, a figure of authority is absent from Isabel's life or what is more, treat her as an object or as capital. Isabel's solitude represents a facility for predators' access to her life. The objectification is a direct consequence of the Victorian patriarchy, not an conscious mistreatment or purposeful offence on behalf of the people around her with the exception of the only declared villains in her life, Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond.

Isabel's mother is referred to only once in the novel, by Mrs. Touchett. The reader is informed that she has died when Isabel was still a child and that the girl's education was rather neglected by the father. As we can see, the protagonist in desperate need of a mother-figure projects that lack onto Madame Merle. At Gardencourt, she and Isabel spend numerous hours in each other's company. After a while, the young lady finds herself feeling "as by the wrong side of the wall of a private garden" (p. 196), she acknowledges the "desire to emulate" (p. 196) Madame Merle's "talents, accomplishments, aptitudes" (p. 196). Hence, "one after another her friend's fine aspects caught the light" (p. 196) and "if Isabel was sometimes moved to gape at her friend aspiringly and despairingly it was not so much because she desired herself to shine as because she wished to hold up the lamp for Madame Merle" (p. 197). In contrast with the episode in which

Isabel took hold of a candle in order to guide her own vision of the paintings, meeting Madame Merle has mutated for Isabel the object of reflection. This lady seems to be a potential role-model, “she was in a word a woman of strong impulses kept in admirable order. This commended itself to Isabel as an ideal combination” (p. 183). Nevertheless, there is an undermining of Isabel’s relationship with Serena Merle: “She liked her extremely but was even more dazzled than attracted.” (p. 197). In the light of Heidegger’s statement, “what only wants to shine does not illuminate” (Burik, 2019, p. 10), Madame Merle’s influence does not become beneficial for Isabel’s destiny in the long run. The protagonist, unconsciously aware of a flaw, only makes “mutilated confidences” (p. 208) to her.

Gilbert Osmond is the third gentleman Isabel meets while in Europe who displays a romantic interest in the young lady. The scene in which Osmond confesses he is in love with her is lighted by “A lamp covered with a drooping veil of pink tissue-paper” (p. 307) which “diffused a strange pale rosiness over the scene” (p. 307). Osmond is as fake as “the wilderness of yellow upholstery” (p. 307) where Isabel is seated. The domestic environment becomes a reflection of the man’s feelings. He notices himself “the false colors, the sham splendor were like vulgar, bragging, lying talk” (p. 307) because he too has interiorized his own discourse and cannot make a difference between his own hypocrisy and honest emotions. The truth is veiled for Isabel, her access to it is barred. Furthermore, the narrator insists on Isabel’s being alone by repeating it twice. She is alone facing the danger of Osmond’s trap. While sitting close to the lying lamplight, Isabel is described on this occasion as on numerous previous ones as holding a book but “her finger vaguely kept in the place”(p. 307), “she was not impatient to pursue her study” (p. 307). The book she is holding and ignoring is a scientific one leaving the reader with the impression that Isabel’s education is meant to be emotional rather than the traditional one. Once Osmond’s efforts to seduce Isabel prove effective and she accepts to marry him, he gives her an enthusiastic speech which is not common for such a cynical person:

It’s just as when one has been trying to spell out a book in the twilight and suddenly the lamp comes in. I had been putting out my eyes over the book of life and finding nothing to reward me for my pains; but now that I can read it properly I see it’s a delightful story. (p. 350)

This is the last instance in which Isabel appears associated with a lamp image, better yet, she becomes the lamp itself as the culmination of her reifying. The identification lamplight/Isabel Osmond refers to is obvious to him and the readers only, but in addition, as we have become by now familiar with the double references of the Jamesian word, the lamp stands for Isabel in her position of ornament-wife, she “had qualified herself to figure in his collection of choice” (p. 304). After a gap of four years, the novel takes Isabel again to find her “framed in the gilded doorway”, “the picture of a gracious lady” (p. 366) as Ned Rosier describes her in the opening of chapter XXXVII, seeming to fit perfectly the role her husband intended for her. Ralph nevertheless is able to see beneath the polished image and laments it without acknowledging that he too was a contributor to it: “Her light step drew a mass of drapery behind it; her intelligent head sustained a majesty of ornament” (p. 391). He then asks himself what Isabel is supposed to represent and then admits in horror that she represents her husband.

Up until this moment, the light that Isabel has been painted in was artificial, an embodiment of materialistic discursive features. With experience, the protagonist’s inflammable imagination is simmered down as she starts acquiring inner perception. Her knowledge previously based on books and asking a million questions to the ones around her shifts to observation. The beginning is marked by an “impression” (p. 404) she receives. One day after she returns from her usual drives with her stepdaughter, she comes home to surprise her husband and Madame Merle in a “familiar silence” (p. 404): “the thing made an image, lasting only a moment, like a sudden flicker of light. Their relative positions, their absorbed mutual gaze, struck her as something detected. But it was all over by the time she had fairly seen it” (p. 405). Isabel’s light is no longer coming from an exterior source, it is an intrinsic manifestation of her previous intuitions she had not known to decipher. What is more, she comes to view a silence as an act of presence, she realizes that the lack of verbal expression between Madame Merle and Osmond carries more meaning than any uttered dialogue.

True vision in the manner of “motionlessly *seeing*” (p. 16) comes to Isabel in her meditation of chapter XLII. The reflection is triggered by Osmond’s demanding of his wife that she help decide Lord Warburton to marry Osmond’s daughter, Pansy. Isabel had been absorbed into her husband’s orbit but had never been asked to be an active agent in manipulative practices. The dubious morality of the issue frames a portrait of Isabel beginning to see things clearly in the dark.

In Heidegger's conception, darkness is a necessary condition for things to make themselves present, "in the darkness we see the stars" (Burik, 2019, p. 10). Thus, Isabel "absorbed in looking" (p. 418) at the situation Osmond presented her with, "closed her eyes" (p. 418). The stream of consciousness extends to Isabel and Osmond's marriage. The first revelation is that "It was her deep distrust of her husband—this was what darkened the world" (p. 421) and her belief that he "hated her" (p. 421). She goes on to acknowledge that though charmed by him, she would not have married if it wasn't for her inheritance. Isabel had not been educated in the capitalist practices and had no idea how to administer assets. She had previously confessed to Ralph that she was afraid of the freedom a large fortune meant and that she wondered if it would not be preferable to avoid its power. When she had a "wondrous vision" (p. 422) of Osmond, she admitted that "At bottom her money had been a burden, had been on her mind, which was filled with the desire to transfer the weight of it to some other conscience, to some more prepared receptacle" (p. 423). Apart from getting rid of the money, she thinks to herself—but we will read Isabel against her—that the other half of the theory is "the beauty of his mind" (p. 424). Her formulation is revealing: "The finest—in the sense of being the subtlest—manly organism she had ever known had become her property" (p. 424). Isabel actually becomes an agent in the patriarchal structure by giving up the capital to a man who had so much taste for art, who would know what to do with it for the benefit of both. The underlying information however is that Isabel acts from an equal position to her future husband but this she finds out the hard way would not be possible, social order would not be reversed (yet). Osmond made it clear to her that she "had too many ideas and that she must get rid of them" (p. 424). In "the house of darkness, the house of dumbness, the house of suffocation", her mind was to be his—attached to his own like a small garden-plot to a deer-park" (p. 425). The acknowledgement of her unhappiness throws a "livid light on everything" (p. 429). One of her few comforts was Ralph's visit to Rome, a "lamp in the darkness" (p. 429). The previously artificial light of the lamps shifts inwardly, for Isabel's suffering made her receptive to others' suffering, "her ache for herself became somehow her ache for him" (p. 429), from sorrow arises empathy. The reflection ends by Isabel returning to the topic of Pansy's marriage prospects and the image she witnessed of Madame Merle and Osmond's complicity:

When the clock struck four she got up; she was going to bed at last, for the lamp had long since gone out and the candles burned down to their sockets. But even then she stopped

again in the middle of the room and stood there gazing at a remembered vision—that of her husband and Madame Merle unconsciously and familiarly associated.” (p. 431)

Isabel sits by candlelight in an attempt to make out the reality of her marriage. Once the candlelight is out, her own mind gives us an account of things. Artificiality, domesticity, Victorianism are replaced by her center of being, light comes from within. Still in a claustrophobic context, Isabel is facing a moral issue, to do her husband’s bidding or preserve her subjectivity. Hannah Arendt grants us a revealing understanding of morality issues in “Some Questions on Moral Philosophy” (1965). She wisely acknowledges that “I cannot do certain things, because having done them I shall never be able to live with myself” (p. 66). She defines ‘solitude’ as one’s constant dialogue with oneself in the thought process and stresses the importance of this being with somebody—me and myself—“this inner dichotomy in which I can ask questions of myself and receive answer”(p. 66). This strategy keeps one in check with one’s own actions, a constant returning to oneself as point of reference, as one’s own moral authority. Moreover, it converges as a definition of subjectivity and identity. Isabel finally does not help Osmond to marry Pansy to Lord Warburton. Her marriage though is a more complex matter that will have to be decided.

2.3. *Empathy, a ‘Reparative Reading’*

Judith Butler’s essay “An Account of Oneself” renders three stages in the structure of identity and subjectivity: the self, the addresser/the other and the social frame. The previous section was focused on Isabel’s reflection, the self’s giving an account to itself, the inner dialogue and the consequent moral implications. In this section I will render Isabel and Pansy as self and other as points of reference to define oneself against and the consequent relationship based on empathy. The following section will deal with the ambiguous ending of the novel and in that context expand Isabel’s self as giving an account within the social frame.

One of the positive relationships in *The Portrait of a Lady* is that between Isabel and her stepdaughter Pansy; the compensating aspect of the bond is the empathy Isabel feels for the girl. I have already argued the narrator’s use of language and lighting to undermine the patriarchal structure in Victorian times. Within the social structure women are viewed as commodities between men and among themselves as illustrated by Madame Merle’s actions as regards Isabel. The young lady reverses this toxic dynamic by addressing with empathy the one who eventually turns out to be Madame Merle and Gilbert Osmond’s daughter. When dealing with Isabel’s

relationship with Pansy, the distinction between morality and ethics necessarily appears. The difference is theorized in Avishai Margalit's 2002 *The Ethics of Memory*, who first distinguishes "between two types of human relations: thick ones and thin ones [...] Thick relations are in general our relations to the near and dear. Thin relations are in general our relations to the stranger and the remote" (p. 7). Ethics is to be used in our thick relations, while morality is to be used in our thin relations with the following manifestations:

Morality is greatly concerned, for example, with respect and humiliation; these are attitudes that manifest themselves among those who have thin relations. Ethics, on the other hand, is greatly concerned with loyalty and betrayal, manifested among those who have thick relations. (p. 8)

There is a progress in Isabel and Pansy's relationship from thin to thick. Osmond in fact appeals to Isabel's sympathy during his courtship to her by inviting the future bride to come and see Pansy on each occasion he can. He is aware that the image of a benevolent father will sit well with an orphaned young lady. Isabel sees Pansy as docile, "a sheet of blank paper" (p. 281) on which Osmond would write her destiny upon. After her marriage proves to be a failure, Isabel takes upon herself the duty of being a good stepmother, "Mrs. Osmond was rarely seen without her stepdaughter" (p. 403). The shift from respect to loyalty, from thin to thick relation happens when Osmond expresses his desire that Isabel should influence Lord Warburton to ask Pansy's hand in marriage. During this tense conversation Isabel "pushed away the book she had been reading and took up the band of tapestry Pansy had left on the table" (p. 415). The simple gesture may appear as Isabel making herself smaller in her husband's demanding eyes, but it also points to identification, to her putting herself in Pansy's place. The conversation that triggers Isabel night of reflection contains a foretelling of her loyalty shifting from her husband to her (step)daughter, a withdrawal from the patriarchal discourse and towards an ethic of solidarity. Isabel finds out that Pansy loves Ned Rosier and already has a suspicion that Lord Warburton is just looking for an excuse to spend more time in Mrs. Osmond's company. The prospect of Pansy making an unhappy marriage as herself helps decide Isabel not to do her husband's bidding. At this point, the protagonist is not yet aware that Pansy is Madame Merle and Osmond's daughter from an old affair. The first Mrs. Osmond having died very young, Pansy was introduced to the world as the child of a widowed father, while Madame Merle adopted the convenient part of a benevolent friend

of the family because the Victorian axis of social life was based on keeping the appearances. This plot is revealed towards the end of the novel by Countess Gemini. She encounters the perfect moment when Osmond denies Isabel permission to travel to England to attend to Ralph on his deathbed. Nevertheless, “she had expected to kindle some responsive blaze, but had barely extracted a spark” (p. 536). One of the reasons for Isabel not creating a scene upon knowing the truth is the little relevance it had by this point in time. The narrator himself points to this by making the Countess reveal the secret because she was famous for her fibs and lies, “my lampshades would be sure to take fire, my roses and my fibs to be larger than life” (p. 354). Isabel however reacts unexpectedly to it, she sighs “Ah, poor, poor woman!” (p. 537) thinking of Madame Merle having to give up her child and having to endure the close relationship between Isabel and Pansy. The fact that the Countess is described as author of lies and fibs as well as the fact that Isabel does not react violently to what she accepts as truthful, points out to a double undermining of the revelation both by the narrator as well as by the protagonist. It is not this what decides Isabel’s destiny and ultimately her final decision to return to Rome. The information is relevant for Isabel’s consciousness, her knowing the truth about her husband and her now former friend Madame Merle, but it does not modify her trajectory because she has already made up her mind to what constitutes her duty and she has already made her pledge, her sacred vow. She has chosen ethics, empathy and solidarity as proof of her own subjectivity and identity. On the background of the disruptive aspects unveiled so far, this positive aspect of *The Portrait of a Lady* would be difficult to omit.

2.4. *The Ambiguous Ending*

Judith Butler’s final stage in “Giving an Account of Oneself” is the self’s relationship with the social frame where “social normativity” (2005, p. 25) regulates both one’s own conduct as well as the norms of conduct between self and other. Moreover, there is no identity outside the social discourse. Dominic J. Bazzanella explains in “The Conclusion to *The Portrait of a Lady*: Re-Examined” James’s decision to render unambiguous Isabel’s return to her husband in Rome as the writer’s reaction to “critical charges of immorality” (1969, p. 7). Ironically, Bazzanella states that “the removal of ambiguity was the primary motive for the revision” (p. 7) of the 1881 edition of the novel and thus making unequivocal Isabel’s return to the right of her husband’s. Given the 19th century context in which the novel was published, one has to admit that a contained ending does not seem unreasonable. There are plenty of aspects in the novel that question the status quo that

do not require an explicit subversive closing. The last piece of information the reader has access to with regards to Isabel is Henrietta telling Caspar Goodwood, “She came here yesterday and spent the night. But this morning she started for Rome” (p. 582). As for what her future will be, one can only imagine. The choice at hand today would be to reflect on the following long quote from Michel Foucault on silences, on the thing left unsaid being as equally important as the expressed one, on who can speak because they were given authority and a voice and who cannot speak because they represent a minority:

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say, we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (1978, n.p.)

6. CONCLUSION

Joseph Conrad wrote what I believe was meant as a critique to the subtlety of the Jamesian discourse in the essay “Henry James: An Appreciation”: “One is never set at rest by Mr. Henry James’s novels. His books end as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of the life still going on; [...]. It is eminently satisfying, but it is not final. Mr. Henry James, great artist and faithful historian never attempts the impossible” (1905, p.107-108). In the light of Kurtz’s ‘horror’ at the human spectacle, it is true that the Jamesian novel does not stir outbursts of indignation that appeal to the human consciousness to overthrow the social order nor does it facilitate a definitive interpretation. In his notebooks containing ideas for *The Portrait of a Lady*, James anticipated the criticism to the ambiguous ending of his novel by stating that “the *whole* of anything is never told; you can only take what groups together” (1955, p. 18, italics in original). What groups together for the readers of the novel is that language lost its affirmative capacities, of creating presence as a symptom of a nonconformity with the patriarchal structure of society and the way women were envisioned in Victorian times; that the discourse undermines the social context it is inscribed in; that the imagination principle embodied in the protagonist counterbalances the negative effects of capitalism and its consequent reification of women as commodities among men and among themselves. The novel underlies dissident characteristics by its use of the language towards the

negative polarity, by ambiguity and by the way it treats light and dark. For the narrator, ambiguity translates into the deferral of meaning in its complex sentences and semantic choices, while for Isabel Archer, ambiguity presents itself at the unconscious level, her intuition of a lack of solidarity among women. Furthermore, the treatment of light and darkness represents a complex issue in the novel with various ramifications. Setting most of the scenes in the novel towards nightfall and refusing to project a future for its characters by use of negative events converge into a sense of an ending the text is permeated with. As for Isabel Archer, the light she appears in is the domestic lampshade the other characters direct upon her in a process that culminates with her being identified with the artificial light. Her trajectory shifts the moment she is demanded to become an active contributor to capitalist practices. Consequently, the external light becomes intrinsic and thus a symbol for Isabel's vision acquired in the darkness her husband engaged her in. She evolves into an empathetic attitude with her stepdaughter, a position of solidarity. The ending of the novel has a secondary character inform the readers that Isabel returned to Rome pointing to a containing of the dissident features displayed throughout the narrative.

As a conclusion, the reader may remember that Isabel's Rome is not just the place where her husband waits for her, it is also where Pansy hopes her stepmother will keep her promise and come back to her, where Saint Peter's sublime overwhelms the senses and where, most importantly, one is remembered of a "sense of continuity of the human lot" (p. 511). What Isabel has learned in her materialistic environment is the business of life, "Deep in her soul-deeper than any appetite for renunciation-was the sense that life would be her business for a long time to come" (p. 553). The deferral of significance as for what the protagonist's future might bring appeals to the imagination of both readers and academics to return to back to this novel time and again. Isabel's position of empathy with respect to Pansy renders a materialization of the imagination principle, an instance of 'reparative reading' setting the tone for readers to reflect on alternative positive possibilities. Without passing moral judgement at any point in the novel, the Jamesian narrative achieves what Toni Morrison coined as a 'sharpening of the moral imagination'.

7. REFERENCES

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